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H PASS TO REPRESENTATIVE CONAWAY; ALSO FOR NEA/MAG

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [OREP](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: REPRESENTATIVE CONAWAY STRESSES SECURITY
COOPERATION IS A TWO-WAY STREET: DECEMBER 19 WITH THE
TUNISIAN MINISTER OF DEFENSE

REF: TUNIS 901

Classified By: Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) In his December 19 meeting with Minister of Defense Kamel Morjane, visiting Rep. Michael Conaway (R-TX) said that U.S.-Tunisian bilateral relations were good but stressed the need for increased cooperation on defense planning and intelligence sharing. He noted that current U.S. budget constraints might affect future assistance levels to Tunisia but that any such changes would not reflect any lessening of the U.S. commitment to maintaining strong ties with the GOT. The discussion also covered the changing role of the Tunisian security forces and the GOT's efforts to counter radical influences in the Tunisian population. Morjane said he would travel to the U.S. in May for the Joint Military Commission. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Representative Michael Conaway (R-TX) met with the Minister of Defense December 19. The Representative was accompanied by the Ambassador, Acting DATT/Naval Attach, and Deputy Pol/Econ Counselor (notetaker). Minister Morjane was accompanied by Director General of Military Security Col-Major Ahmed Chabir; Director for Cooperation and International Relations Col-Major Ghorbel; Capt-Maj. Khammassi, responsible for International Affairs on the Minister's staff; and Mourad Bel Hassen, Americas Desk Deputy from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Bilateral Cooperation

¶3. (C) Rep. Conaway said cooperation and intelligence sharing on regional security was a key part of the bilateral relationship and had to be a two-way street. He suggested that the arrival of a new U.S. Ambassador presented an opportunity for a fresh start. Rep. Conaway then noted that U.S. budget constraints might mean reduced military assistance in the future, but that the GOT should not confer any parallel reduction in the USG commitment to the bilateral relationship. He also told the Minister he plans to join the Tunisian Caucus in Congress.

¶4. (C) In his opening remarks, Minister Morjane repeated several times the GOT's gratitude for USG assistance and military equipment. He thanked Rep. Conaway in particular for Congress's support in increasing military assistance to the GOT in 2010. He also noted that there was a MFA representative in the meeting and explained that if he were not present the Minister would have to send a full report of

the meeting to the MFA. (Comment: This was the first time an MFA representative has been present in such a meeting for at least the last two years. End Comment.)

15. (C) Minister Morjane highlighted the changing role of the Tunisian security forces saying Tunisia has excellent relations, including intelligence sharing and defense cooperation, with the Governments of Algeria and Libya. Therefore, the armed forces do not need to focus on protecting Tunisia from its neighbors. The mission of the army is not only to defend the country but to help the people, especially in those areas where it is difficult for the private sector to operate. He explained that the National Guard controls the land borders while the armed forces are posted behind the borders.

16. (C) About half the armed forces are concentrated near the borders, the Defense Minister continued. The remainder are involved in a variety of tasks including providing assistance to civilians through infrastructure development projects, especially in the south. He said Tunisia and the United States are "fighting the same enemy which lies elsewhere and which can arrive at the border in unpredictable shapes including with blue eyes or carrying a Singapore passport." Morjane said the GOT was ready to cooperate with the USG in joint exercises and training within the extent of its capabilities. Rep. Conaway replied that bilateral cooperation was important, that joint exercises were helpful, and that the personal relationships developed during these exercises had proven key to avoiding mistakes and misunderstanding in other countries, especially during crises.

Stopping Radicalization

17. (C) Rep. Conaway asked Morjane how the GOT works to counter influences that foster radicalization. Minister Morjane responded that both security and social measures were necessary. "Those who have nothing, have nothing to lose." He gave full credit to President Ben Ali for making education and health care priorities for the country. However, he added, the large numbers of people who go to the mosque to pray on Friday reflect the importance of Islam in Tunisia even though the government has not made the religion a rallying point for the country. The GOT is responding to the growing influence of Islam by stressing the moderate, tolerant interpretations of Islam that have traditionally prevailed in Tunisia.

The United States and the Middle East

18. (C) Minister Morjane credited President Obama's Cairo speech with helping to change America's image in the Middle East. He said President Obama's position on the Israeli-Palestinian issue was seen as more balanced than the previous administration's and that he was pleased the United States was making it clear the fight against extremism could not be won with weapons alone. Rep. Conaway said he thought the Arab-Israeli issue was somewhat of a proxy for all the other perceived problems, remarking that even if it were solved, the other problems would still remain. Minister Morjane agreed, but maintained that an Israeli-Palestinian settlement would still help across the board. Morjane observed that since 1965, when former President Bourguiba was the first Arab leader to call for a two-state solution and told the Palestinians they had to negotiate with the Israelis, Tunisia has been the only country able to speak freely to all sides on the Arab-Israeli issue.

Morjane Plans Washington Travel

¶9. (SBU) Morjane confirmed that he would be going to Washington DC in May 2010 for the annual meeting of the Joint Military Commission.

¶10. (U) Representative Conaway did not have the opportunity to clear this message before leaving Tunis.
GRAY